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Bosnia-Herzegovina

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Agricultural Biotechnology Report

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Report Highlights:

Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) anti-biotech position is growing day by day, and now some imported U.S. food products are being tested for biotech content and are rejected. BiH lacks detailed regulations for the import and marketing of biotech foods, and since November 2004 the import of biotech products has been forbidden. Knowledge about biotechnology is poor even among scientists and agricultural officials. Agriculturists and non-government organizations that promote organic agriculture oppose biotech applications and encourage producers, consumers and regulators to reject biotech products.

Includes PSD Changes: No
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SECTION I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) imports around two thirds of its overall food needs; and the country's major trading partners are neighboring countries such as Croatia and Serbia and European Union (EU) countries. Imports of U.S. consumer products have been minor, while imports of U.S. origin bulk commodities (mostly wheat and sunflower seed oil) were part of a U.S. food donation program to BiH. Although there has not been much trade between the two countries, reservations towards U.S. origin foods (usually those containing soy or corn) are increasing because of biotechnology applications. BiH's anti-biotech position is becoming more severe every day and some U.S. food products previously imported without problems are now being tested for biotech content and some have been rejected. The BiH just started adopting regulations that govern biotech products and, due to the lack of detailed regulations, import and marketing of biotech foods is presently forbidden. Also, no laws and regulations regarding approval and production of agricultural biotechnology crops have been drafted yet. There have not been any significant applications of agricultural biotechnology yet in Bosnia and Herzegovina and only limited funds are available for biotechnology research. Since the 1992-1995 war, the country has suffered from an economic crises that affected both the education and scientific research and development centers. The private sector has not yet started any agricultural biotechnology research and application activities.

Generally speaking, biotech products are not desirable in BiH. Consumers dislike biotech foods and have reservations towards "GM foods" due to a lack of consumer knowledge of the subject and negative influence from EU countries. Sophisticated consumers think that they do not have enough information to be for or against biotech products, and that they need more education in order to decide whether or not they will consume them. More information could change consumer attitudes towards biotechnology in a positive direction. Additionally, more knowledgeable consumers say they would eat biotech foods after proper testing and labeling, so they could decide whether they want to buy such a product.

The position of the European Union has influenced consumers' attitudes toward biotech products for a long time, but it is not the only reason for Bosnia's resistance. Both the government and farmers tend to think that organic production is an important segment of BiH agriculture. Agricultural production is more traditionally oriented and use of agrochemicals/pesticides is lower than elsewhere in Europe. There are also few industrial polluters. Agriculturists believe that the release of biotech products would threaten organic production in the country and cause losses of potential export markets.

SECTION II. BIOTECHNOLOGY TRADE AND PRODUCTION

BiH does not produce biotech crops and there are no laws and regulations that govern approval and production of biotech products. There are no biotechnology crops under development in BiH. The country does not import biotechnology products since the new Food Law was adopted in November 2004. The Law says that import and marketing of biotech products is forbidden until detailed regulations are drafted and adopted by the Government/Food Agency.

Prior to this law, there was no law on the import and marketing of biotech products, and it is believed that some biotech food products entered BiH as regular products without any testing or labeling. For a long time after the 1992-1995 war, BiH was unable to control its border effectively, and imported food products have been generally less controlled and tested than compared to imported products in other European countries. Only recently, testing for biotech content has been ordered by the inspection services if there is a suspicion of biotech content.

The country is a food aid recipient and has been part of the USDA monetization program since 1997. In 2000, U.S. corn offered as donation under the food aid/monetization project was rejected because it contained biotech content. Two years later, the country accepted biotech soybean meal imported from the U.S. as a donation only because it was approved for marketing in the EU.

SECTION III. BIOTECHNOLOGY POLICY

There is no law that regulates the production of biotech crops in BiH yet. The Law on Seeds and Seedlings (BiH Official Gazette # 3/05) only mentions that biotech seeds and seedlings have to be labeled, while all other products are to be regulated by a separate law on biotech products that does not yet exist. To summarize - there are no biotechnology crops that have been approved for food, processing, and feed; no field-testing of biotechnology crops; and no policy on coexistence between biotechnology and non-biotechnology crops (including organic agriculture).

The new Food Law adopted in November 2004 (BiH Official Gazette # 50/04) generally regulates import and marketing of biotech food products. According to the law provisions, biotech food products are considered "novel foods" and are mentioned as the following categories:

- Food and food ingredients which contain genetically modified organisms or are composed of such and
- Food and food ingredients, excluding food additives (aromas and enzymes), produced from the GMO, but which do not contain any GMOs;

According to the provisions of this Law, to market any novel food for the first time in BiH, the applicant must obtain a permit from the BiH Food Safety Agency¹, based on previously obtained scientific opinions and approvals of relevant bodies (most likely the Entity² agricultural ministries and institutes, the Entity ministries of health and trade and the State Veterinary Office, depending on product type). The Council of Ministers, based on the suggestion of the Food Agency, shall adopt the regulations pursuant to the import and marketing of novel foods/GMOs. The permits for placing novel foods on the market and feed containing or consisting of biotech products shall not be issued until the adoption of the implementing regulations, meaning that the import and marketing of biotech foods to BiH is forbidden until regulations are put in place. The Food Law also does not regulate the labeling of biotech products, and it will be most likely set by the regulations that will follow. Since BiH's goal is to join the European Union in the near future, it is expected that the country will follow the EU guidelines in drafting those implementing regulations. The Food Law also regulates the prohibition of novel food marketing if there are any scientific discrepancies regarding the harmful effect of novel foods on people's health, especially food and food ingredients containing genetically modified organisms or consisting of them (that is, if based on a scientific risk assessment, a product is established as harmful to the health, and in the case of lacking relevant scientific information and knowledge about the possible extent of the negative consequences to human life and health, the product is deemed harmful).

¹ The BiH Food Safety Agency is a young institution that started operating in June 2006..

² Under the Dayton Peace Agreement, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is divided into two Entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (F BiH) and Republika Srpska (RS). The Entities are responsible for agricultural and food issues, as well as health issues, and there is no national-level agricultural/health ministry. The responsibilities regarding the food laws are divided as well, and each Entity has its own laws and enforcement mechanisms. There have been some similarity between the two systems, but there has been no common food law yet at the national level until now. The EU has suggested BiH to establish a national-level agricultural and rural development ministry in 2005, but so far it hasn't happen.

The Law on Consumers protection (BiH Official Gazette #17/02) that was adopted in June 2002 but not fully implemented yet states that biotech products have to be labeled. However, it does not go into details (the Entity Ministries of Trade are responsible for labeling issues).

The main political factor that influences regulatory decisions related to agricultural biotechnology is the country's goal to join the European Union integration. In 2003, the European Commission (EC) approved a feasibility study assessing the readiness of Bosnia and Herzegovina to begin negotiations for a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) on the condition that BiH makes significant progress in some priority areas, one of which was food safety. As a result, the country has been continuously adopting laws and regulations in line with those of the EU. So far significant progress has been made, but progress to date is insufficient to start with a SAA.

BiH is not party to the Cartagena Biosafety Protocol.

SECTION IV. MARKETING ISSUES

The market acceptance of biotech products for producers, importers, retailers, and consumers has been officially unknown. There have been no studies regarding this topic. BiH has gone through a recent war with much destruction taking place, and the country is still suffering a poor economic situation. As a result, biotechnology is a sort of new issue. The knowledge about biotechnology is poor even between scientists and agricultural officials. However, the level of biotech acceptance has decreased recently due to EU influence and the anti-biotech positions of some neighboring countries, especially Croatia. Also, agriculturists and non-government organizations that promote organic agriculture are opposing biotechnology applications in general and are influencing producers, consumers and regulators to reject biotech products. Recently, the media and consumer's association in BiH criticized BiH authorities for not better controlling imported foods with biotech content and for approving the import of biotech commodities from the U.S. under the food aid program. This was probably influenced by Croatian consumers who widely protested against the detection of biotech content in food items found in supermarkets during the summer of 2004. This "anti-GMO" movement in BiH is weak at the moment but is expected to become much stronger in the future.

SECTION V. CAPACITY BUILDING AND OUTREACH

In May 2002, the Agricultural Faculty in Sarajevo organized a conference on agricultural biotechnology regulations and environmental risk assessments. USDA supported the conference through an American private voluntary organization that was approved for the monetization program. The main outcome of the conference was recognition that BiH has to become more actively involved in biotechnology research and applications, and that the country urgently needs national legislation for biotech products. Unfortunately, no significant progress has been made.

Under the Cochran Fellowship Program, two young scientists attended the Agricultural Biotechnology Short Course in summer 2003 organized by Michigan State University in collaboration with USDA. In 2006, two candidates from the Agricultural Institute Banja Luka were accepted for the same course.